UNITED NATIONS

CEDAW

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

Distr.
GENERAL

CEDAW/C/SR.357
27 March 1998

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

COMMITTEE ON THE ELIMINATION OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN

Seventeenth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 357th MEETING

Held at Headquarters, New York,
on Wednesday, 23 July 1997, at 10.30 a.m.

Chairperson: Ms. ABAKA
(Vice-Chairperson)

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In the absence of Ms. Khan, Ms. Abaka (Vice-Chairperson), took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 10.45 a.m.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS SUBMITTED BY STATES PARTIES UNDER ARTICLE 18 OF THE CONVENTION (continued)

Combined third and fourth periodic reports of Bangladesh (CEDAW/C/BGD/3-4)

1. At the invitation of the Chairperson, Ms. Chowdhury, Mr. Hossain and Mr. Pasha (Bangladesh) took places at the Committee table.

2. Mr. HOSSAIN (Bangladesh) said that the Constitution of Bangladesh enshrined the principle that women should have equal rights with men in all spheres of public life. However, while the goal of equality of women and men had been conceptualized by the Father of the Nation long before the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, during the past two decades, effective programmes and policies for the advancement of women in Bangladesh had not been pursued with suitable earnestness. Nevertheless, since her election to office the previous year, the new Prime Minister and her Government had been doing their utmost to fulfil their commitment to the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, and despite serious obstacles considerable progress had been achieved.

3. Measures taken by the Government included the adoption of a national policy for women's development and the formulation of a National Action Plan for the implementation of that policy and of the Beijing Platform for Action. In those and other initiatives undertaken by the Government, Bangladesh had benefited from the expertise of many women's and human rights activists and non-governmental organizations. Committees had been formed to review problems and to submit recommendations for prompt implementation. Indeed, the Government and civil society had embarked on a nationwide mobilization for achieving women's rights, with special attention being paid to such issues as violence against women, trafficking in women and children, and legal reform. Women in Bangladesh were increasingly being represented in public life and at decision-making levels. Indeed, the country was in the unique position of having women both as Prime Minister and leader of the opposition, and of having had two women succeed each other as Prime Minister.

4. He was pleased to inform the Committee that the Government of Bangladesh had decided to withdraw its reservations to article 13, subparagraph (a), and article 16, paragraph 1 (f), of the Convention.

5. Ms. CHOWDHURY (Bangladesh), introducing the combined third and fourth periodic reports of Bangladesh, said that the report had been prepared against the backdrop of two extensive consultative processes involving governmental and non-governmental organizations, agencies and individual women's rights activists and researchers. The first was an institutional review of the Government's capability in the field of women and development; and the second was the draft

National Action Plan as a follow-up to the Beijing Platform for Action. The current report was designed to provide an understanding of the nature of the gender inequalities that pervaded society and to identify the remaining obstacles.

6. Such development indicators as health, nutrition, employment and education, showed that the status of women in Bangladesh was significantly lower than that of men. Women were subject to discrimination both in cultural practice and in personal law, and - although their development had been a stated objective of the Government - progress towards the removal of disparities had been limited. Traditional cultural, social and religious values and practices had reinforced the lower status which society accorded to women and had restricted their opportunities for education, technical and vocational training and employment, thereby limiting their participation in the overall development process. The economic contribution of women to the family and the national economy often went unrecognized. In that connection, the issue of provision for childcare was becoming increasingly important as more and more women left home to enter the job market and the extended family system was replaced by nuclear families.

7. Women were still expected to play very traditional social roles. The concept of sharing roles was virtually non-existent and community support services highly inadequate. Although changing, the practice of seclusion (purdah) was still socially valued, while the dowry - a recent phenomenon which had no basis in Islam - continued to be one of the worst forms of discrimination against women.

8. The Constitution recognized the reality of the unequal situation of women, since it acknowledged the need to make special provisions for them as a disadvantaged category. Women constituted 48 per cent of the total population of Bangladesh, and at 450 per 100,000 the maternal mortality rate was one of the highest in the world. Within the one- to four-year age range, 10 girls per 1,000 as opposed to 9 boys died. Women also had less access to health care than men, and most health programmes did not address the needs of a woman throughout the life cycle, concentrating instead on safe motherhood and family planning. In the context of an overall literacy rate of 32.4 per cent, only 25.5 per cent of women were literate. The school drop-out rate for girls continued to be high, and in rural households only one fourth of total educational expenses was spent on the education of girls. The proportion of female students was significantly lower in such technical disciplines as agriculture and engineering, which were considered the domain of males.

9. While the minimum legal age for marriage was 18 for girls and 21 for boys, actual age at marriage could not be ascertained, owing to inadequacies in the birth registration system. The long childbearing span of women in Bangladesh worsened their already poor nutritional status and contributed to the cycle of high maternal mortality, malnutrition and babies with low birthweight.

10. The growing trend towards landlessness and the increasing number of female-headed households was subjecting women to severe economic pressures. Employment opportunities were unequal for women, who constituted only 24 per cent of the total number of workers employed in the manufacturing sector. Women labourers, however, comprised over 90 per cent of the total labour force in the garment and

shrimp-processing industries. Rural-urban migration of women in search of jobs was a recent phenomenon in Bangladesh.

11. On the positive side, there was an increasing awareness that women should enjoy the same political and civil rights as men. The Government was committed to the strategy of mainstreaming women in development and recognizing women's rights as human rights. That approach was reinforced by the strategies adopted by various non-governmental and human rights organizations and by women's activist and research groups. The strategies adopted included bottom-up participatory approaches, capacity-building and increased training for women.

12. At the same time, however, several encouraging trends were emerging. Literacy rates, together with primary school enrolment and completion rates, were rising. The enrolment of girls and women at the secondary and tertiary levels of education was also increasing. More women were pursuing higher education, including in such fields as engineering and agriculture. Maternal and infant mortality rates were falling. The contraceptive prevalence rate had increased to 45 per cent and the Expanded Programme on Immunization currently covered 76 per cent of children under the age of 23 months. Ninety-six per cent of the population had access to safe drinking water. Employment opportunities were opening up and national statistics were gradually being revised to take account of women's participation in the labour force. Finally, women were emerging as a separate constituency in national politics.

13. During the past decade, women's participation in the banking and business sectors and in non-governmental organizations had also increased substantially. The economic participation of women was, however, greater in the informal sector and had increased considerably as a result of the success of the self-employment programmes organized by the Government and by non-governmental organizations. Access to credit as a development input and a tool for poverty alleviation was an experiment by Bangladesh which had been followed in several other countries, with the Grameen Bank model, in particular, being replicated abroad. Microcredit had enabled many families to improve their economic lot and climb the social ladder.

14. The Government had also taken steps to ensure the participation of women in the formulation and implementation of public policy and in the holding of public office. A quota system for all types of public appointments had been introduced to facilitate the entry of women. Under that arrangement, 10 per cent of recruitment to gazetted posts and 15 per cent to non-gazetted posts was reserved for women. During the past five years, approximately 14 per cent of total recruits into the public service had been women.

15. Quotas had little impact at the higher administrative levels, however, despite special initiatives to appoint women to senior positions, and despite the fact that both the incumbent Prime Minister and the leader of the opposition were women. Women as voters were gaining visibility and political strength; it was estimated that nearly 66 per cent of voters in the 1996 parliamentary elections had been women, and their vote would be crucial in bringing women's issues to the forefront of public policy discourse. Thirty seats were reserved for women in Parliament, and the Constitution provided for reserved seats for women in all municipal and local government bodies. That practice was having a

positive impact by enabling women to learn about the workings of the political process firsthand.

16. Social stereotypes of men's and women's roles were reflected in the media and in educational curricula. The media were being encouraged to formulate their own code of ethics governing the portrayal of women, the use of women in advertising and reporting on violence against women. Some measures had also been taken to revise school curricula to eliminate stereotyping.

17. The issue of violence against women merited special attention because of its potential to undermine their achievements and participation in public life. Violence and threats forced women to accept abuse and subordination. For instance, failure to pay a promised dowry often resulted in violence against the bride. Although new laws had been enacted imposing more severe penalties for violence against women, it continued unabated. The Government had become increasingly aware of such related issues as custodial rape, rape by members of law enforcement agencies, extrajudicial violence at the community level based on the invocation of the shariah, or religious law, and the misuse of local arbitration bodies. The Ministry of Home Affairs had set up women's investigation cells in police stations staffed by women police officers to facilitate their access to the police. The Department of Women's Affairs had established a service to provide legal assistance to women victims of violence. In addition, the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs was undertaking a multisectoral action programme.

18. The issues of trafficking in women and children had subregional and regional dimensions, and regional cooperation was urgently needed to combat it. Rehabilitation services for repatriated victims were limited and Government-run shelters inadequate. Non-governmental organizations were collaborating in the design of needed programmes in that area.

19. The Constitution provided for equality of all citizens before the law, yet the protection accorded through civil law was outweighed by the inequalities reflected in the personal laws governing some vital areas of women's lives. Women found it difficult to make use of the judicial system because of the lengthy procedures and expense involved, and law enforcement agencies were often hostile or unsympathetic to them. Deficiencies in infrastructure, such as a lack of birth registration or a central database on marriage and divorce registrations, made the enforcement of the Child Marriage Act difficult and polygamy almost impossible to prevent. Although Muslim family law allowed women to inherit property, social customs and family pressure often prevented them from claiming their fair share. Laws on trafficking were sometimes not applied because members of law enforcement agencies were themselves involved. In response, the Government had established a Permanent Law Commission to review and update existing laws with a view to safeguarding women's rights and preventing violence against women.

20. The national development plans, an important means for the advancement of women, had gradually shifted in approach from relief and rehabilitation to women's development. The main aim of the current five-year plan (1997-2002) was to integrate women's development into the overall development framework and reduce gender disparity in all sectors through education, training and income-

generating projects, with special support for educating the girl child. Policy measures envisaged included providing women with access to power through access to resources.

21. The institutional framework to combat gender inequality included the National Policy on Women's Advancement, which provided an overall policy framework for women's development, and the National Council for Women's Development, a 44-member body made up of ministers and secretaries from relevant ministries, public representatives and eminent persons, with the Prime Minister as head. Another major component of that institutional framework was the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs, whose role included national policy formulation, implementation of special programmes, women's legal and social rights, registration of voluntary organizations and dealing with international organizations. Its role had recently been expanded to include cross-sectoral coordination of women in development and the protection of children. National non-governmental organizations could also be considered a part of that overall institutional framework, since many worked exclusively for women.

22. With regard to the issue of reservations to the Convention, the Government had already announced its decision to withdraw its reservations from article 13, subparagraph (a), and article 16, subparagraph (f). The women's movement in Bangladesh had begun to lobby for full withdrawal of reservations in the context of the preparations for the Beijing Conference.

23. The Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs had been designated the lead ministry for follow-up and implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action; for that purpose, it had set up a small working group called the Core Group for Beijing Follow-up made up of activists and researchers involved in the women's movement and staff of the Department of Women's Affairs. The Group had conducted a sectoral review and needs assessment and had as a result selected 12 ministries for priority attention. Those ministries had been involved in the process of formulating the National Action Plan, which had secured their commitment to its implementation. The Plan emphasized the strategy of mainstreaming women's development in government policies and programmes, on the premise that all ministries and agencies had responsibility for women's development because women were a major portion of the population that each agency existed to serve. The Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs was concentrating on advocacy, communication, coordination and monitoring.

Replies to questions contained in the report of the pre-session working group (CEDAW/C/1997/II/CRP.1/Add.3)

24. Mr. PASHA (Bangladesh) said that two areas of Muslim personal law (one concerning succession and inheritance and the other concerning marriage and divorce) conflicted with article 2 and article 16, paragraph 1 (c), of the Convention. However, as those laws were derived directly from the Koran and Shariah, there was no programme to change them, nor was there any programme to change Hindu laws on such matters that might also conflict with various provisions of the Convention. It was impossible to state whether or not religious laws (or any other non-constitutional law) conflicted with the Constitution's provisions on equality because only the Supreme Court could

decide such questions, in the context of duly constituted legal proceedings; no such proceedings had yet come before any court in Bangladesh.

25. The Government had no plans to withdraw its reservations to article 2 and article 16, paragraph 1 (c), of the Convention, though it might reconsider the issue in the future. However, it had already decided to withdraw its reservations to article 13, subparagraph (a), and article 16, paragraph 1 (f).

26. Under the Fourth Five-Year Plan, which had covered the period 1990-1995, women's labour force participation had risen to 18.2 per cent; life expectancy differences between the sexes had been nearly eliminated; female literacy in relation to male literacy had risen to 73.3 per cent; women had gained greater access to credit and employment, inter alia in industry and the public service; and major gains had been made in terms of health, nutrition and access to services and infrastructure. Further details had been provided in the report (CEDAW/C/BGD/3-4) and in the introductory statement.

27. The provisions of Islamic law in force in Bangladesh did not conflict with the spirit or substance of the Convention except in the case of article 2 and article 16, paragraph 1 (c), in respect of which Bangladesh had expressed reservations.

28. The appointment of 30 seats for women in Parliament had given women greater visibility in the public sphere and had initiated them into the political process. Women members of Parliament brought up a number of women's issues (dowries, unequal wages, child marriage) in the debates, thereby making their male colleagues more sensitive to women's concerns and exerting pressure for the introduction of new legislation. They had also initiated bills to promote women's rights, including one that would have limited polygamy (which had been defeated) and one that proposed direct elections of women to a larger number of reserved seats (which was still under consideration).

29. Under the Bangladesh Decade Plan for the Girl Child, whose major goals were listed in section 2.3.4 of the report, the infant mortality rate had been reduced to 77 per 1,000 in 1994, girls' enrolment had risen to 79.5 per cent in 1995 and the gender gap in enrolment rates had been virtually eliminated, the primary-school completion rate had risen to 60 per cent, the mean age at marriage for girls had risen to 19.9 in 1995 (meaning that the goal for the year 2000 had already been met), 96 per cent of the population had access to safe drinking water and 48 per cent had access to sanitation (exceeding the mid-Decade goal of 35 per cent).

Article 2

30. The Muslim Family Laws Ordinance of 1961 had amended Muslim personal law by modifying inheritance provisions, prohibiting additional marriages after the first marriage without permission from an Arbitration Council constituted according to the Ordinance, imposing procedural restrictions before divorce became effective, prescribing a special procedure for determining the amount of maintenance payable by a husband to his wife and modifying provisions concerning dowers. The Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 had raised the marriage age for girls from puberty or 15 years (under Islamic law) to 18 years, and had also

thereby restricted the rule of Islamic law empowering the guardian of a minor to marry the latter before puberty.

Article 3

31. In the context of efforts to spread awareness of women's legal and human rights, the Convention had been translated and disseminated through government agencies and non-governmental and women's organizations. In view of the low literacy rate, it was currently being simplified and illustrated for wider dissemination and use as an advocacy tool and to facilitate village and group discussions. There were campaigns by the Mass Communications Department and a television programme on human rights. Some non-governmental organizations had legal-literacy programmes and some adult education materials included women's human rights issues, as did the Government's rural development programmes. Women's organizations, such as the CEDAW Forum, had also undertaken public awareness programmes on the Convention.

32. The National Council for Women's Development, headed by the Prime Minister and comprised of ministers, secretaries, women legislators and women experts, was the highest policy-making body for women; it provided policy guidelines and improved coordination by promoting cross-sectoral issues. An Inter-Ministerial Coordination and Evaluation Committee headed by the Minister for Women and Children's Affairs consisted of the Joint Secretaries of all government ministries, who served as women-in-development focal points. The Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs was responsible for policy formulation, advocacy, linkage and coordination; its Department of Women's Affairs played a similar role at the field level. Women in Development Focal Points in 40 ministries and departments were responsible for incorporating women-in-development issues into their sectoral plans and for implementing, monitoring and coordinating activities. Lastly, a specialized coordination mechanism, chaired by the Minister for Women and Children's Affairs, had been established to follow up cases of violence against women.

33. Owing to overall resource constraints, the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs did not yet have the human and other resources it needed to reach its goals. However, it sought to overcome those constraints by mainstreaming women-in-development issues into all other government ministries and departments.

Article 4

34. Ms. CHOWDHURY (Bangladesh) said that the impact of temporary special measures for women's advancement was monitored by the relevant government departments and agencies and by the Inter-Ministerial Coordination and Evaluation Committee.

Article 5

35. Various factors, including women's lack of awareness of their legal rights, prevented the full implementation of laws to combat violence against women. Social and cultural prejudices and gender stereotypes were prevalent and might influence law enforcement agencies and judicial processes. Media campaigns and

training initiatives were being conducted and educational curricula and materials were being revised to eliminate those prejudices and stereotypes.

36. Although the police were supposed to respond immediately to reports of domestic or other violence, such incidents often went unreported because they were considered to be a private matter. Government hospitals provided immediate medical assistance to victims of violence, and the major hospitals had medical social welfare officers who provided counselling and limited financial support; however, specialized care was lacking, and the victims did not always reveal the cause of their injuries. Some non-governmental organizations provided legal counselling, but professional psychological counselling and shelters were in very short supply. The Government was considering the provision of financial assistance to non-governmental organizations that were willing to build and run shelters.

37. A commission had been set up to review all laws concerning violence against women, to identify lacunae and to propose reforms. In addition, a committee to review the Family Law and the Women and Child Repression (Special Provision) Act of 1995 had submitted its report to the Government. Steps were being taken under both civil and criminal law to make enforcement mechanisms more effective. Senior police personnel received specialized training through workshops and seminars. Modules on women's rights and violence against women were included in the training of judges and prosecutors, as were sessions on the Convention and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Those issues would also be included in the multisectoral project to be initiated by the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs. Lastly, public awareness campaigns on violence against women were being conducted by the Government and women's organizations. In April 1997, a total of 789 cases of violence against women had been reported.

38. Although Bangladesh had no women's prisons, men and women were separated within existing prisons. With respect to safe custody for victims of violence or trafficking, the practice was to provide such women with secure shelter. The number of remand homes for children (including girls) was inadequate; the Government was considering the establishment of such homes in each district, as well as the establishment of "neutral" homes for women victims of violence or trafficking. A committee on jail reform had been set up, and reforms of criminal procedures were being considered.

39. Inquiry committees to examine cases of custodial rape and violence set their own rules of procedure and held inquiries as quasi-judicial bodies; often, they were vested with the powers of civil courts to summon and examine witnesses and take evidence. The results of such inquiries were made public. The best solution, however, was to bring offenders to regular trial in criminal courts.

40. Domestic violence was included in laws that addressed violence against women, such as the Women and Child Repression (Special Provisions) Act, which provided for harsh penalties for domestic violence. The Government was considering further improvements to the law.

Article 6

41. The constitutional provision on prostitution was one of the fundamental principles of State policy which were not enforceable through the courts. Prostitutes were entitled to the same rights, protection and privileges as other citizens. Health-care services were available to them, as to other citizens, and major hospitals had opened special outdoor centres near or within brothel areas. The Government sought to discourage prostitution, primarily through efforts to reduce poverty, which was at the root of the phenomenon. With respect to the closure of the Kandupatti brothel, the Government was examining ways and means of relocating the evicted women and children and establishing rehabilitation programmes for them; six rehabilitation centres would be set up for such women.

42. The Government maintained active cooperation and coordination with non-governmental organizations in combating trafficking in girls and women. Law enforcement agencies acted promptly on information provided by such organizations, which also participated in the multisectoral project described in section 2.5.1 of the report and in the Department of Women's Affairs working group on trafficking.

Article 7

43. The Prime Minister and the leader of the opposition, both of whom were women, encouraged women's political participation through their personal example. In addition, the Prime Minister had appointed three women to ministerial positions and had approved a scheme whereby women could enter Joint Secretary-level posts from other government service posts. Women voter turnout in recent elections had been striking.

44. The draft Local Government Act would reserve one third of all elected seats in local bodies for the direct election of women candidates at all four levels of local government. The various political parties were responsible for preparing women to compete in elections; the women's movement was mobilizing them to that end.

45. No quantitative data were available on the position of women in trade unions. However, female garment workers, who made up 90 per cent of the workforce in that industry, had recently formed a union.

Article 8

46. The procedures for recruiting women into the foreign service were the same as those for men. Women who did well in the written and oral examinations were able to enter the foreign service. Women applicants benefited from the 15 per cent recruitment quota for women and were also eligible under the merit quota. Sometimes the quotas could not be filled, however, because insufficient numbers of women applied and/or qualified.

47. The Government did not maintain lists of Bangladeshi nationals employed at the United Nations. However, a number of Bangladeshi women were working at

senior levels. The United Nations could play an active role in recruiting Third World women.

Article 9

48. Mr. PASHA (Bangladesh) said that the Government was aware that the Citizenship Act was discriminatory and the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs had taken up the matter with the Ministry of Home Affairs.

Article 10

49. The Government had initiated various programmes to combat illiteracy, including the Food for Education Programme and programmes for free and universal primary education. A Primary and Mass Education Division had been established under the Prime Minister. Literacy and non-formal education programmes for children and adults initiated by the Government and non-governmental organizations had contributed substantially to an increased enrolment of women and girls. A secondary level scholarship programme and other programmes had been introduced for girls; as a result, the number of girls in secondary schools had increased from 32.5 per cent in 1985 to 47 per cent in 1995, and it was expected that the number of girls in secondary schools would soon equal that of boys. Media campaigns had been conducted by the Government and non-governmental organizations to encourage the education of girls.

50. Almost all foreign-assisted development programmes included awareness-raising programmes, and much of the improvement in the areas of nutrition, family planning and immunization could be attributed to the complementary efforts of the Government and foreign development partners, as well as non-governmental organizations.

51. In 1995 the percentages of female students had been the following: medicine, 41 per cent; agriculture, 8 per cent; engineering, 12.24 per cent; and vocational training, 14 per cent. A special programme had been undertaken by the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology with assistance from Canada to encourage women to study energy and mining, and to encourage schoolgirls and college girls to study mathematics with a view to a career in engineering.

52. Educational curricula were being revised to make them more gender-sensitive and remove gender stereotypes. A study to identify the learning needs of girl students had been undertaken with the assistance of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Two booklets were being tried out in the light of the needs identified and would be introduced in primary schools in the near future.

Article 11

53. The Government was aware of the problems in the implementation of the minimum wage rate in many factories and private companies. Employment conditions in many factories did not meet the standards of the International Labour Organization (ILO). Television spots had been used for awareness raising about equal wages for men and women for the same work.

54. The Ministry of Labour and Manpower made sure that women workers did not go abroad without the knowledge of their male "guardians" and that they had adequate information about working abroad. Although Bangladeshi embassies abroad were responsible for protecting the interests of Bangladeshi migrant workers, migration sometimes took place without the knowledge of the Government. Some initiatives had been taken by non-governmental organizations to raise awareness among people in the border areas and within the Government administration about the existence of networks of trafficking and prostitution and the risks faced by women workers. The Government had recently designed a project with assistance from ILO and UNICEF for the prevention of child trafficking.

55. Most private firms and all public sector employers provided maternity leave. Information on the number of employers who provided child care facilities was not available.

56. Various labour laws and ILO Conventions ratified by the Government sought to protect the interests of women and children. The informal sector, however, was outside government regulatory mechanisms.

Article 12

57. Although at the community level childbirth care was provided by family welfare assistants and trained traditional birth attendants, the coverage needed to be improved. In rural areas 65 per cent of babies were delivered by untrained providers who were mostly relatives and neighbours. The Government had decided to train an additional 31,000 traditional birth attendants during the period 1997-2000. Information, education and communication activities were under way to sensitize family members to the risks of pregnancy and improve the utilization of trained birth attendants, and a referral system was being developed for complicated cases.

58. The maternal mortality rate had been reduced to 450 per 100,000 live births; despite the preventive measures taken, the prevalence of pregnancy-related morbidities and abortion complications remained very high. Emergency obstetric care initiatives had been expedited to provide care during late pregnancy, labour and the post-partum period.

59. Women resorted to unsafe abortion procedures because of the high number of unwanted pregnancies, especially in rural areas, where abortion morbidities accounted for one fifth of maternal deaths. Menstrual regulation services had been made available in almost all service facilities, and treatment for complications of abortion was available at district and divisional-level hospitals and at thana (Subdistrict) health complexes.

60. Norplant services were being provided throughout Bangladesh by nearly 100 government and non-governmental organization clinics, serving about 10,000 women in urban and rural areas. Comprehensive training had been provided to physicians and counsellors. The quality of services was maintained by strict monitoring and frequent refresher training; as a result, the quality of services for other methods available at the clinics had also improved.

61. According to the 1993-1994 Bangladesh Demographic Health Survey, 44.6 per cent of married women used some method of family planning, including 8.4 per cent who were using traditional methods. Among the modern methods, contraceptive pills were the most prevalent (17.4 per cent), followed by female sterilization (8.1 per cent), injectables (4.5 per cent), condoms (3 per cent of men), intra-uterine devices (2.2 per cent) and male sterilization (1.1 per cent). Male contraception, including traditional methods, accounted for one quarter of the total. Family planning clinical surveillance teams monitored the quality of clinical services nationwide, and there were various ongoing projects to improve the quality of care in health and family planning sectors.

62. Sex pre-selection and female foeticide were not yet a problem in Bangladesh.

63. The Government had set up a national programme to control sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). A national AIDS committee had been established in October 1985 and reconstituted in 1988; the committee advised the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare on all aspects of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and AIDS. A short-term plan had been implemented in 1988, and a medium-term plan had been formulated with assistance from the World Health Organization; financial constraints had delayed its implementation, but activities had continued under an interim plan.

64. A national policy on HIV/AIDS- and STD-related issues had been approved in 1997; it included a policy statement on the human rights of those infected with HIV. The policy endorsed the confidentiality of personal and medical information and recognized the vulnerability of women in protecting themselves against HIV because of their subordinate status.

65. The infant mortality rate in 1995 had been 78 per 1,000 live births. A significant proportion of neonatal deaths resulted from low birth-weight; about 40 per cent of newborn babies were underweight because of maternal depletion, chronic malnutrition and lack of proper antenatal care. The rate could be considerably reduced by the year 2000 if proper maternal care was provided during pregnancy and childbirth and adolescent and high-risk pregnancy were reduced. Emergency obstetric care, safer birth practices and better care for newborns would further improve the situation. Post-neonatal mortality was mainly caused by infections which could be reduced by early and adequate treatment of the infant.

Article 13

66. Ms. CHOWDHURY (Bangladesh) said that women were as eligible as men to take out bank loans if they met the criteria and the collateral requirements. Technically, they did not need the consent of their husbands, although banks sometimes asked for the consent of male relatives, especially since most women did not possess property to fulfil the collateral requirements.

67. Institutions such as the Bangladesh children's and fine arts academies were working to promote recreational facilities and participation in cultural activities and were encouraging women and girls to participate. There was a

women's sports complex in Dhaka, as well as various cultural groups and children's groups. All schools and district-level organizations had sports and cultural programmes. However, the facilities and opportunities for women were limited compared to those for men.

68. Women public servants had the same rights to family benefits as men. Non-governmental organizations and private-sector organizations did not discriminate against women, but many of them did not provide family benefits as most of their positions were temporary. Some State social welfare measures would be introduced in the future as the economy improved.

Article 14

69. Non-governmental organizations had substantially contributed to the creation of self-employment opportunities for women in rural areas through the provision of credit and training and had helped women become aware of the value of their contribution to the family and the national economy. As at March 1997, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee had disbursed 11.714 billion taka to over 1.3 million borrowers, of whom 45,542 were women; as at May 1997, the Grameen Bank had disbursed 71.84 billion taka to 2.13 million borrowers, including 2.01 million women; the Association for Social Advancement had disbursed 4.389 billion taka to 562,000 borrowers up to December 1996; and Proshika had disbursed 2.99 billion taka to 1.06 million borrowers by December 1996.

70. Many non-governmental organizations had created their own marketing outlets for women's products. A number of government bodies had established marketing outlets, and in some cases had created export markets; women were guaranteed fair prices.

71. Inheritance was governed by Muslim personal law, and the Government was bound by that law. In the ownership of land or any other property there was no distinction between men and women, and they enjoyed equal rights.

72. The Government, with assistance from foreign development partners, was implementing programmes for services to rural areas, some of which were specifically targeted at women. Non-governmental organizations were also active in providing services in rural areas. The Rural Electrification Board was expanding its programme to cover all subdistricts in the country, thereby contributing to the increased involvement of rural women in various productive activities.

Article 15

73. Family courts had made litigation involving domestic disputes cheaper and more expeditious.

Article 16

74. Women public servants were bound by the same rules as their male counterparts in relation to family medical benefits.

75. Various public education campaigns had been undertaken to disseminate information about the risks of early pregnancy. Although the law prohibited marriage under the age of 18 for girls, most people did not have birth certificates or other proof of their age and the majority of marriages were not registered. The Government was committed to improving all types of registration. Reproductive health education was being provided to adolescent girls through the educational curricula, and some non-governmental organizations had developed specific training.

76. Dowry payments impoverished the girls's family and often caused indebtedness; non-payment often resulted in violence, separation, abandonment or divorce. Men sometimes married repeatedly in order to receive dowry payments. Dowry payments illustrated the negative value given to girls and women.

77. Following the enactment of the Dowry Prohibition Act in 1980, violations were being prosecuted. Some procedural restrictions had been imposed on the practice of polygamy among Muslim males, and its incidence was declining. Compliance with the Child Marriage Restraint Act was unsatisfactory, and prosecution was rare. As a result of increasing general social awareness, however, the mean age at marriage of girls had risen to 19.9 years among all communities.

The meeting rose at 1.05 p.m.